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APRIL 1

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*The client was missing a painting. A stolen painting—but he'd always meant to give it back. And now it was gone, from a locked room in which something else was missing.*

# CARDULA AND THE LOCKED ROOMS



**"This is a very delicate matter, Mr. Cardula. What I tell you must be kept in the strictest confidence."**

**"You may trust me implicitly, sir."**

He nodded approval. "I am ready to pay generously for your services, Mr. Cardula. Generously."

Usually my clients plead near poverty when it comes to negotiating my fees. When they volunteer money freely, I am always suspicious. And

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curious.

Thompson was a thin man in his middle fifties, well-dressed, with well-manicured nails. Blood type B, I guessed.

"Are you a *full-time* private detective?" he asked. "Not moonlighting from some other job, are you? I mean your display ad in the telephone book specified night hours only, and that rather intrigued me."

"I do not moonlight in any accepted sense of the word, sir. I am simply a night person."

He hitched his chair closer and got to the point. "My painting has been stolen."

"I presume you have already informed the police?"

"No. They are the very last people I want in on this. But I want my painting back. Have you ever heard of *The Feast*? It is Van Gogh's lesser known sequel to *The Potato Eaters*."

I remembered something else. "*The Feast* was stolen from the Andrews Museum of Art some four or five years ago. And yet you refer to it as *your* painting?"

"I paid good money for it."

"You bought it from the thief?"

"About a week after it disappeared from the museum. He came to me."

"And you knew it was stolen?"

He shifted in his chair. "I guess I did. But if I hadn't bought it, he would have sold it to somebody else. I couldn't let that happen."

"It never occurred to you to call in the police?"

He shrugged that off. "All kinds of things could have gone wrong and he could have disappeared forever with it. No, I decided that the only way to recover the work was to buy it from him."

"But you did not return it to the museum."

"Well, not exactly. I felt that since I'd recovered the painting and paid a goodly sum for it—done a public service, so to speak—I should be entitled to enjoy it privately for a few years. I fully intended to return it to the museum eventually." He studied me. "If you take any of this to the police, I will deny everything. Besides, I don't have the painting any more."

I smiled faintly. "I have no intention of going to the police. My word is my word. So the thief stole the painting and came to you knowing that you might be interested in buying it for your own personal pleasure?"

"I guess you could put it that way. I didn't *commission* him to steal it,

if that's what you suspect."

He sighed heavily. "Well, I had the painting and obviously I couldn't exhibit it openly. Therefore I hung it in a room on the second floor of my house. I kept that room locked at all times and I have the only key. When I wished to enjoy the painting, I would let myself in, and when I left, I locked the door behind me."

"No one else knew you had it?"

"No one. At least I *thought* no one knew, but now I am not at all certain about that. That's why I'm here. If I thought some ordinary thief had stumbled upon the painting and fled with it into the night, I would simply leave the entire matter there. But I have my *suspensions*."

"Has it occurred to you that the man who sold you the painting may have decided to re-steal it with the idea of selling it again to someone else?"

"That would hardly be possible. A week or two after I bought *The Feast*, he was shot and killed on another job by an art gallery guard."

"But in the short time preceding his death, could he not have told someone else that he'd sold the painting to you?"

"Perhaps. Yet why would this unknown person wait five years?" He shook his head. "But whoever stole the painting knew exactly where to find it in my house. And it was the only painting stolen from my collection. Nothing else was disturbed, though I have other masterpieces on my walls, openly exhibited. Not in locked rooms."

"What about your servants?"

"They've all been with me a long time. If one of them had been so inclined, he could have stolen any one of my paintings long ago. Perhaps even all of them. No, whoever stole *The Feast* wanted that particular painting and no other."

He regarded me for a few moments. "Actually, I think I know who stole the painting. Or at least that it's one of two people I'm suspicious of. Their names are Diana McKenzie and Gordon Duffin."

He smiled grimly. "I have always regarded them as friends. Good friends. They too are serious collectors and I have entertained them frequently as guests. Fairly recently I may have made some slip and given away my secret, even to the painting's location in my house." He coughed slightly. "Unfortunately I occasionally drink too much. Just occasionally. And I must have blurted it out on one of those evenings, though I don't really remember to which one of them or when."

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He rose. "I suppose you would like to see the scene of the crime? I touched nothing. My car is downstairs."

"Thank you, but I will provide my own transportation."

Actually I am well-acquainted with the suburb in which Thompson lived—I myself have a large sturdy Victorian in a nearby rural area—and since I always take the direct route, I got to his home before he did. I waited in the shadows until Thompson entered his house and his chauffeur-driven car went on to the garages at the back of the house before I knocked on the door. Thompson let me in, offered me a drink, which I refused, and mixed one for himself. He carried it with him as he led me upstairs to the second floor. We passed down the carpeted corridor, turned a corner into a small passageway, and stopped at a door. Thompson produced a key.

When he unlocked the door and switched on the lights, I entered an opulently furnished room of medium size. Thompson indicated a spot on the wall. "This is where it hung."

I stared about the room. "Are you positive none of the servants knew you had the painting? After all, a locked room in a house is something of a challenge."

"I don't ordinarily use this wing of the house at all so I keep all the rooms locked."

"If someone learned that you had the painting and wanted it, why didn't he first make you an offer?"

"Cardula, you may not understand the mind of the dedicated collector. Such a person would know there was really no point in asking me to part with it."

"When was it stolen?"

"I don't know, since I don't come up here every day, but it could have happened last Sunday between one and five in the afternoon. All the servants had the day off. The only person still on the grounds was the gardener, and he was watching a football game in his quarters over the garage. I myself was out on the lake in my boat and didn't get back until five. When I went upstairs to look at the painting, it was gone."

"The thief had used a key to the room?"

"No, apparently he came up the balcony outside. He broke a pane in one of the french windows and unlocked it from the inside." He pulled back the drapes so I could see the broken pane and the glass shards on

the rug. "I don't think you'll find any fingerprints. Neither Diana nor Gordon would be that stupid."

I turned about to study the furniture, the rug, the fireplace, even the high ceiling. I was looking for something. But what? Something was missing from this room. Something besides *The Feast*. But I could not for the world of me think what it might be.

Thompson watched me. "I'll get you Diana's and Gordon's addresses," he said. "They both live within a mile of here."

I decided to drop in on Diana McKenzie first, since her place was the nearest. I arrived there at one thirty A.M. and circled the dark house. On the ground floor I found an unlocked window.

If Diana McKenzie had stolen the painting, where would she keep it now? In some closet for the time being? I moved silently through the rooms, trying various doors. Moonlight streamed in the windows and since I have excellent night vision, I didn't find it necessary to turn on any lights.

I found nothing of any particular interest to me, and yet I frowned. There was something missing here, too. Not the same thing that was missing from Thompson's locked room, whatever that was, but something entirely different. I could think of no answer to either puzzler, however.

On the second floor were guest rooms, all of them unoccupied. When I reached the next to last door in the corridor, I found another bedroom but one which had the look and general feel of being used. I opened the door to a closet filled with women's clothes and searched it. Nothing. The next door revealed a bathroom. I tried the third door on the opposite side of the room. It was locked.

Ah, what did we have here? Another closet? Would a bedroom have two closets? And if it did, why would one of them be locked and not the other? Or did the door lead to another room? I got out my set of picks and was about to find out when the lights snapped on.

I turned to see a strikingly handsome woman standing at the light switch. She regarded me coldly. "Are you looking for something?"

It was certainly a most embarrassing situation. I would have blushed had I been able.

I pulled myself together. "Madam, have you ever seen me before?"

"No."

I smiled. "Good." I opened one of the windows at my elbow and leaped

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to the ground below. As I hastened across the lawn, I looked back. She was at the window watching my progress.

I found Gordon Duffin's house dark and well-secured. I had to use my lock picks to get in.

Once again, on the second story, I encountered empty guest rooms until I opened the fifth door in the hall. A bedroom too, but this one contained a middle-aged man asleep in bed. I tiptoed into the room and opened a door which revealed a closet of clothes and shoes. I opened the door beside it. A bathroom. I tried a third door. It was locked.

I was mildly surprised and definitely curious. I brought out my lock picks again. I stepped through the doorway into what was apparently a room and closed the door behind me. In the absolute darkness I could see nothing. I ran my hand along the wall until I found a light switch and flipped it.

I blinked.

On the wall before me hung a painting. *The painting.* I stepped closer.

*The Feast.* A family of peasants in the gloom of a cave-like kitchen solemnly consuming boiled cabbages and staring empty-eyed at nothing.

I looked around me then at this room I had found, and realized instantly what was wanting in Thompson's locked room. It made me think. Considerably.

I would have liked to have taken the painting with me, but it was impossible, aerodynamically. The next evening, therefore, after I rose and dressed, I collected my car from its carriage house. I don't ordinarily use it except in inclement weather when one is in danger of a drenching, or in winter when the cold can freeze the very blood in one's veins.

Thompson answered the door immediately and showed me in. "Well? Have you found out anything yet?"

"Gordon Duffin has the painting."

"You've actually seen it?"

"Yes."

He was pleased. "Wonderful work. And fast." Then he discovered that I wasn't carrying anything. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Surely when you *saw* the painting, it must have occurred to you to bring it back?"



"There was a difficulty."

"What difficulty could there possibly be?" Then he chuckled. "Ah, I see what it is. You are retreating behind the technicality that you were being paid to find *who* took the painting, not to retrieve it? That is another job for which you expect to be paid additionally?" He sighed. "Very well. I've heard about the ethics of private detectives before. I am prepared." He opened a wall safe and extracted a stack of bills. "Thirty thousand dollars. But that's my limit. I won't haggle."

I shrugged. The circumstances of the case were unique, and my home has an open-end mortgage.

There were lights on the third floor of Duffin's house—probably the servants' quarters. Otherwise it was dark.

I let myself in. This time Duffin's bed was unoccupied. I went to work on the locked door.

In my car, I wrapped the painting in a blanket. Tomorrow that Van Gogh was going to be returned to the Andrews Museum of Art.

Thompson would, of course, be furious. He might even demand that I return the thirty thousand dollars, but I would refuse, pointing out that, after all, he had deceived me and I don't think much of deception. Especially when I am the victim of that deception.

I sighed at the perfidy of man. The situation had been the very opposite of what Thompson had presented to me. It had not been Thompson who had bought the painting from the thief. It had been Duffin. It had not been Thompson who kept the painting in a locked room. It had been Duffin. It had not been Thompson who had had a little too much to drink one evening and let it slip out that he had the painting. It had been Duffin.

And thus Thompson needed a leg man. He had concocted his whole story for my consumption, even going so far as fixing up a locked room, staging the theft, and handing me two "suspects."

He had, however, committed one oversight.

Dust.

Or rather the *absence* of dust.

If, as Thompson had claimed, no one but him knew of the painting or had entered the room in five years, then who did the dusting? The vacuuming? I could hardly picture Thompson himself doing it.

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But Thompson's room had been nearly spotless, as though it had been gone over within the week, and probably it had.

Duffin's locked room, on the other hand, had dust all over it, and spider webs high in the corners.

I was conscious of an increasing fatigue. When I have not had sustenance for more than a week, I weaken rapidly. I would have to do something about that and soon.

Diana McKenzie answered the knock herself. She stared at me, still unafraid. "Well, well, back again?"

I nodded. "Frankly I just couldn't get you out of my mind. I decided to return and apologize."

I handed her one of my cards.

She glanced at it. "And just what was a private detective doing in my home last night? What were you looking for?"

"A stolen painting. I believe I know what you keep in that locked room."

Her eyes flickered.

"You think I have a stolen painting upstairs?"

"No. Not now. Last night I should have realized you couldn't possibly have stolen the painting. The theft occurred in the afternoon. And when I searched your house, I felt there was something *missing* from the ground floor rooms—something that should have been there but wasn't."

"And what was that?"

"Mirrors. You have them in your bathrooms and guest rooms, of course, but there are *none* anywhere else in the house, where you might find yourself in company. I should have guessed it. That magnificent pallor, those eyes, that absolute fearlessness."

Those eyes began to gleam.

"And what is it you keep behind that locked door? Aren't you aware that just a few ounces of your native soil tucked under your pillow is quite sufficient to see you safely through the day? There is no need for the entire box."

"I am a traditionalist," she said stiffly. "I go the whole bit." Her eyes zeroed into mine with an intensity guaranteed to freeze, to mesmerize, anyone on earth, with a few possible exceptions, of which I am one.

She glared for a full thirty seconds and then frowned uncertainly.

I extended my smile past my lateral incisors.

She blinked, and when she could believe, she said, "This is the most incredible coincidence."

I offered my arm.

"I was about to go out for a bite. Would you care to join me?"

She did.



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